The Defense Information Debate:
The American Military at the Dawn of the 21st Century

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The U.S. Army War College and the Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies cosponsored a conference in Washington, DC, on October 5, 2001, to examine options for transforming the U.S. military. Among the 225 registered attendees were representatives from the military, the executive branch, and the Congress, as well as defense experts from private industry, think tanks, and academia.

The conference centered on three panels. The first considered the strategic context for transformation, the second concerned force structure and technology alternatives, and the third examined organizational implications. This brief summary highlights the salient points raised in these panel discussions.

A central theme throughout the meeting concerned the scale and nature of needed change. All agreed that change was necessary, but change is always necessary, even in much less dynamic technological and geopolitical environments than today s. Stasis is thus a straw man. There was substantial disagreement, however, over how much and what kind of change are required.

In particular, advocates of sweeping change focused on three areas where they felt incremental adaptation is insufficient: the need for a new American foreign policy framework; the need for a force structure more oriented on the revolution in military affairs (RMA); and the need for major reform in the U.S. military command structure. Moderates, by contrast, voiced concern that proposals for sweeping change could abandon traditional concepts and capabilities that remain essential.

Sweeping Change: Imperialism and America First.

Some see recent American foreign policy as an unsustainable compromise between mutually exclusive alternatives. We have been engaged abroad, they argue, but only enough to breed enmity without being sufficiently committed to secure our interests. This yields opposite proposals for sweeping change: a case for an imperialist foreign policy that embraces a more interventionist role, and a case for an America first policy that disengages from overseas commitments and focuses U.S. security policy on homeland defense.

The imperialist brief sees important benefits to American primacy, both for America and for others. Imperialists argue that open markets, for example, are facilitated by a dominant power who has the ability and the will to compel states to reduce their trade barriers. International disputes are more likely to be resolved peacefully when one state enjoys a preponderance of power and is willing to use it on behalf of conflict resolution. The more peaceful, more prosperous world that results is in everyone s interest, reducing the dangers of al Qaeda-style terrorism by creating order in place of the failed societies and local anarchies that create and harbor terrorists.

Of course, not every potential hegemon is benign: a Nazi or Communist empire would have had horrific consequences, and both were appropriately resisted. The British Empire, by contrast, was a broadly beneficial hegemony, many imperialists argue, and a liberal American Empire would be, too. It matters who the hegemon is, and America could enjoy a legitimacy that others have not.

An imperial foreign policy would imply a very different military with four main components. We would require powerful deep strike forces capable of emphatic dominance over any combination of competitors, imperialists argue. Second, we would need expeditionary ground forces able to deploy quickly to punish norm-breakers but without a need for sustained, large-scale combat actions; a combination of the Marine Corps and cross-service special forces would be ideal. Third, we would need constabulary forces to keep the peace abroad and maintain order where this exists; this role would be best suited to a radically restructured Army. Finally, domestic law enforcement with Reserve component military augmentation would protect the American homeland against terrorism.

By contrast, the case for America First holds that the costs and benefits of an assertive U.S. foreign policy have been transformed by the September 11 attacks. Whereas engagement is preferable, other things being equal, they argue that the benefits are now outweighed by the costs of becoming a target for groups like al Qaeda. Asserting U.S. power, moreover, is unnecessary for prosperity: mutual economic incentives are sufficient to provide for trade and access to oil or other raw materials. Local conflicts may escalate without our involvement, but it is better to cope with escalation by defending our borders than by intervening in faraway lands: a strong homeland defense backed up by a sole superpower s resources will deter parties with no real need to challenge us, and, by staying out of others disputes, we reduce their motives for involving us.

An America First policy would likewise imply a very different military from today s. Its predominant focus would be homeland security, with a heavy emphasis on frontier defense, missile defense, airspace control, and terminal security for key infrastructure and CONUS economic assets. Nonmilitary security agencies would see a major increase in relative importance and funding, with the FBI, CIA, INS, and Customs Service all rising in priority as key counterterrorist resources, and with major efforts in consequence management by a wide range of civilian and military organizations. The Coast Guard would be radically expanded. American forces would be withdrawn from most overseas bases. Increased emphasis on assets with intercontinental reach (such as B2 bombers and carrier battle groups) would compensate for the rejection of forward basing and provide deterrent power to dissuade foreign actors from drawing America into local disputes. The Army would transition to a role focused on territorial defense on American soil, and restructure accordingly. The Marine Corps, with no expeditionary mission to perform, could be disbanded or drastically reduced.

Sweeping Change: An RMA Force Structure.

Many see U.S. force structure as lagging behind the technological and geopolitical imperatives of the RMA. The United States now enjoys a geopolitical strategic pause in which we face no peer competitor, they argue; we should exploit this breathing space to discover and implement radically new forces and doctrines for taking advantage of information age technology. The sheer inefficiency of experimentation means that we cannot both transform and remain ready to fight multiple major wars in the meantime, hence today s absence of a peer competitor offers an irreplaceable opportunity to put major resources into transformation before facing a real threat. The danger of complacency is the real threat of today: without a clear and present need, we could fail to take the dramatic steps needed and get caught flat-footed when a new superpower eventually arises.

For RMA advocates, this implies a need for heavier investment in science and technology programs, and rapid development of new weapon systems such as arsenal ships and Streetfighter littoral warfare surface combatants; space-based radars; very long range, stealthy unmanned aeriel vehicles for both surveillance and strike missions; and stealthy transport aircraft (especially for special forces insertion). New combat formations and doctrines for using such systems need to be designed and extensively tested in rigorous wargames and field maneuvers, they argue. Sunset systems like carrier battle groups and heavy tanks need to be reduced, and back- ward-looking weapon programs like the Joint Strike Fighter, the DD-21, or the Crusader need to be cancelled or radically curtailed. U.S. force structure needs to be overhauled, with major reductions in close combat forces and short-range aircraft, a major shift toward increased reliance on very long range deep precision strike systems, a much more bomber-centric attack force, and a major increase in special operations forces for waging the coming war of shadows against terrorism.

Sweeping Change: Command Structure Reform.

Closely related to the argument for an RMA force structure is the case for major command structure reform. Some argue that major organizational change is overdue. It has been 54 years since the National Security Act of 1947 established the government s overall organization for defense decisionmaking; the military has been organized around divisions, carrier battle groups, and fighter wings for longer than that. Given the scale of technical and geopolitical change since then, we surely need to revisit these choices.

Among the specific options for such reform might be the development of a National Security Council-like organization for the new Homeland Defense Agency, wherein a powerful Homeland Defense Adviser and staff acted both as policy coordinators but also as the President s advocates in shaping the agendas of the component Cabinet departments. The interagency process could also be overhauled to facilitate jointness and improved coordination across departments. Within the military, a global counterterrorism commander-in-chief (CINC) could be established to counterbalance regional parochialism in the current structure and facilitate cross-regional operations in the war on terrorism. A Space Command or Information Warfare Corps could be established to lend greater coherence to efforts in these critical domains. The current division/wing/battle group structure could be replaced by flatter, less-hierarchical alternatives to speed decisionmaking and information flow. The Army in particular could be reorganized to place less of its essential support activities in unwieldy division or corps size units, perhaps by establishing self-contained brigade size units capable of independent deployment and operation.

Moderate Change: Retaining What Works.

Others argue that sweeping change is unnecessary and potentially counterproductive. With respect to strategy and foreign policy, for example, some argue that the chief problem before September 11 was that traditional internationalist realpolitik, was ignored, not that it somehow failed or represented an unsustainable compromise. We repeatedly failed to retaliate when terrorists killed Americans, as in Somalia and Yemen, and we backed down by withdrawing American military assets when we received subsequent threats of terrorist action against U.S. forces overseas. Defense reformers scorned peacekeeping, nation-building, and development assistance, yet a serious effort at using American economic power or diplomatic clout to promote a less chaotic post-Soviet Afghanistan might have denied Osama bin Laden his base of operations. Chronic underinvestment in defense stretched our forces too thinly to respond as forcefully as traditional *realpolitik* would have suggested; combined with a lack of will to use our power where necessary, this emboldened opponents to believe we were paper tigers who could be bullied into withdrawal. If so, the solution is not to adopt a radical vision of imperial or isolationist foreign policy, but simply to exercise the normal tools of great power statecraft in a more sustained, forceful way.

Similarly, some argue that calls for radical force restructuring undervalue traditional forces and overlook important shortcomings in new technology. Calls to retire Army close combat force structure in favor of special forces or constabulary units, it is held, err in assuming that we will never again need to fight a major theater war. The war on terrorism may indeed be winnable without large-scale land forces—but it also may not. If early, small-scale uses of force fail, we will face powerful pressures to escalate. Among the most powerful escalatory threats at our disposal is the ability to topple regimes who sponsor terrorism by invading and taking political control of their territory. Against regimes like the Taliban's or Saddam Hussein's, this is the ultimate sanction. And this sanction requires large-scale close combat forces: air power alone cannot topple a regime that takes appropriate countermeasures by hiding its forces and its key leaders.

Calls to restructure away from close combat and toward heavier reliance on long-range precision strike, some argue, fail to recognize the incentive this gives our enemies to adapt. Deep strike systems work best against massed targets in the open. They are much less effective against dispersed opponents in forests, mountains, cities, or towns. Such complex terrain offers cover, creates background clutter, and greatly reduces the sensor performance on which all else depends in deep-strike warfare. As our deep strike capabilities grow, our opponents thus face a growing incentive to avoid massed formations in the open and emphasize dispersed opera- tions in cover, where close combat forces offer the only effective means of reaching them. A restructured U.S. military with more effective deep strike technology, larger deep strike forces, and smaller close combat forces would give our enemies a double incentive to disperse into cover: not only would massed operations in the open be more costly against such a restructured U.S. force, but dispersed operations in cover would be less so, given the U.S. reductions in close combat capability. If anything, the optimal U.S. response to improving deep strike technology is to shift toward greater emphasis on close combat, not less, given our opponents incentives for responding to this technology. We certainly should not be creating opportunities for them via self-inflicted vulnerabilities in close combat capability.

Others argue that many of technology s benefits can be had with modest deployments rather than wholesale re-equipment. In this view, modest numbers of stealthy aircraft, for example, could be used to destroy air defenses, opening the doors for larger fleets of cheaper, nonstealthy systems to operate with impunity. Moderate nuclear missile defense (NMD) programs could defend against small rogue-state missile inventories without threatening Russian retaliatory capabilities, providing much of the benefit of NMD without the geostrategic costs of a new arms race or Russian diplomatic alienation.

Organizationally, too, some argue that proposals for sweeping change should be approached with caution. Reorganization has unintended, as well as intended, consequences. The Goldwater-Nichols reforms, for example, created regional CINCs who have subsequently become so powerful as to overshadow the U.S. ambassadors in their regions, becoming almost viceroys and exerting inordinate influence over U.S. foreign policy by virtue of the institutional capacity granted them by the Goldwater-Nichols Act. None of this was anticipated by the Act s authors or supporters. In light of this, some hold caution is warranted in evaluating major reorganizations whose downstream consequences cannot be completely anticipated.

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